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# DO 501 Basic Christian Theology

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**DO 501**  
**BASIC CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**  
**Dr. Larry Wood, Professor**  
**(Saturday Meetings, Feb 17, March 3, 24, April 7, 28)**  
**Spring 2001**

*WELCOME!* This is an introductory course in theology designed to help seminary students understand in a thoughtful manner the basics of Christian belief. I hope that you will learn to see the importance of ideas and their implications for life and ministry as a result of interacting with the whole gamut of our doctrines which help us to think rightly about God. Think about this--revelation is highly intellectual. Revelation is intellectual in the sense that God has communicated to us, and how else could a conversation between God and us take place unless we had intellects to understand what is said. This is why Wesley said that "reason is the candle of the Lord." However, this course is intellectual without being intellectualistic. That is, divine revelation is something that we can understand with some degree of clarity, but its truth does not depend merely upon a logical grasp of abstract ideas. God's self-revelation happened in history, and He is the source of our knowledge of Him, not us and our rational ideas.

One does not have to be a philosopher or a critical scholar to appreciate and comprehend the essentials of Christian belief. At times, however, you may find some aspects of this course challenging, but I hope you will be open to think in new ways that will help you to be a more informed minister of the gospel. For what is at stake is your calling to preach the gospel in an informed manner.

*PURPOSE*

1. To provide a general introduction to the nature of systematic theology;
2. To become acquainted with the range of literature related to the study of systematic theology;
3. To understand the classical doctrines of Christian faith;
4. To engage the student in contemporary forms of theology;
5. To highlight the doctrinal emphases of Asbury Theological Seminary;
6. To see the practical implications of doctrine and theology for the Christian life;

*REQUIRED READING*

- (1) William E. Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1973) (selected chapters, on reserve shelf).
- (2) John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).
- (3) C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan Co.) (selected readings, on reserve shelf)
- (4) Thomas Oden, *The Living God* (New York: Harper, 1987) (selected readings, on reserve shelf)

- (5) Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," *Theology as History*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper, 1967), pp. 101-133. (reserve shelf).
- (6) L. Wood, "Defining the Modern Concept of Self-Revelation: Toward a Synthesis of Barth and Pannenberg," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Volume 24, No. 2 (Fall, 1986): 85-105. (reserve shelf).
- (7) L. Wood, "Above, Within, or Ahead of? Pannenberg's Eschatologicalism as a Replacement for Supernaturalism," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, 4, No. 2 (Fall 1991): 43-72. (reserve shelf).
- (8) L. Wood, "From Barth's Trinitarian Christology to Moltmann's Trinitarian Pneumatology," *The Asbury Theological Journal* (Spring 1993). (reserve shelf).
- (9) L. Wood, "Easter and Pentecost--a Theology of History." (reserve shelf).
- (10) L. Wood, "The Spirit of Miracles and Gifts," *Truly Ourselves, Truly the Spirit's* (Grand Rapids: (Zondervan, 1989) (reserve shelf).
- (11) L. Wood, "History and Hermeneutics" (xerox copy on reserve shelf)

#### *GRADE DETERMINATION*

Each student will contract for a grade. There will be no formal tests. Students will write essays (not a research paper) reflecting their understanding of the dynamics of the issues addressed in this course. This means there are no mere right or wrong answers in the purely factual sense. Rather there are more or less adequate understandings. These essays are to be succinct and clear. Avoid repetitious and needless words and phrases. The standard of theological formulation is the classical interpretation of Christian faith, but translating those formulations into our contemporary ways of thinking is a process which is an always ongoing task. The essays assigned for this course are intended to initiate the student into this theological process of acquiring for themselves their own personal theology.

**For a grade of "C", write the following essays:**

##### On the Doctrine of God--

1. The Task of Systematic Theology (2 page)
2. The Concept of God's self-revelation (2 pages)
3. The Meaning of Natural Theology (1/2 page)
4. The Eschatological Concept of God's Transcendence (2 pages)
5. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Reader-Response Hermeneutics (2 pages)

##### On The Doctrine of Jesus Christ--

1. The Theological Relevance of the Virgin Birth (2 page)
2. The Concept of Jesus as God and Man, noting especially the inadequate views of the incarnation and why they are inadequate. Note also Pannenberg's psychological model of Jesus' unity with God (6 pages)
3. The Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection (4 pages)
4. Demythologizing and the Nature of Religious Language (4 pages)

### On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit--

1. The Holy Spirit as a Person (2 page)
2. Moltmann's Trinitarian Pneumatology (4 pages)
3. The gift of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit--A Wesleyan Perspective (3 pages)

For a grade of "B", write the above essays plus a ten page essay on the John Fletcher's concept of Christian perfection. See below for a statement on Fletcher's importance for theology in the Wesleyan tradition.

For a grade of "A", write all the essays above (including the essay on Fletcher's concept of Christian perfection) and a ten page essay on the sacrament of infant baptism.

The fulfillment of the above contract for a grade assumes that each student will produce quality work. Otherwise, sub-standard essays will be voided.

### Who Was John Fletcher?

John Fletcher was Wesley's personally designated successor, and his writings formed the theology for Methodist preachers from 1771 until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when theological Liberalism largely displaced original Methodist beliefs. As the first theologian of Methodism, no other person besides John Wesley was as influential in Methodism. His writings were the required textbook of every Methodist preacher. Wesley's *Life of John Fletcher* which was revised by Joseph Benson was widely read and went through 27 reprints in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There were thirteen imprints of Fletcher's writings in America (beginning in 1796) before Wesley's *Works* were first published in 1826, though of course Wesley's writings were available from Britain as were Fletcher's as well. This does not minimize Wesley's importance, but it shows that the early American Methodists largely interpreted Wesley through the lens of John Fletcher. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury knew Fletcher even before they were introduced to Wesley, and they were heavily indebted to him. Not only was he a "genius," he was known as a "saint." It was largely John Wesley's *Standard Sermons* as interpreted by John Fletcher that shaped the beliefs of early Methodism. One early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Methodist historian referred to Fletcher's writings as "the thought of Wesley voiced by Fletcher." It was Fletcher's writings on Pentecost that heavily influenced the rise of the so-called Wesleyan-Holiness tradition (including Asbury Theological Seminary) which also gave rise to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pentecostalism. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century would do well to rediscover this forgotten hero of Methodism. No other theological treatise better preserves the message of early Methodism than this classical work on Christian perfection, though his other general works were also part of the library of every Methodist preacher. In 1775, Wesley edited *The Last Check* (which was later abridged under the title of *Christian Perfection*) and he then published it. Wesley noted in a letter to Fletcher (August 18, 1775) that there was "no difference between them." *Christian Perfection* went through numerous re-printings in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, there were more than 174 printings of Fletcher's different writings throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. To understand Fletcher is to understand what the early Methodist preachers believed and preached!

In writing your personal reflections on Fletcher's *Christian Perfection*, you may choose to reflect on some of the particular ideas of Fletcher, using them as an opportunity to help you define for yourself a proper understanding of biblical holiness. You may wish to reflect on the way Fletcher integrates devotion and theology. You may wish to write a "commentary" on specific sections which you may find particularly helpful or inspiring. The purpose of this reflection paper is to engage you directly and existentially in Fletcher's writings, which will also help you to relive the way early American Methodist preachers learned their theology.

### *CLASS FORMAT*

The design of the class is a “lecture” format. Lectures will be given on a variety of selected subjects related to systematic theology with a focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. Small group discussions may be assigned on occasions.

The nature of the lectures will not be geared toward a mere dictation of the professor’s notes. The lectures will be given in a more spontaneous and conversational style in order to engage the student in the lively and existential process of thinking dialectically about the issues. Overhead class notes will be available on the library reserve shelf. These will be placed on the reserve shelf usually the week following the lectures since last minute changes may be made to the lectures. The assigned readings are the more structured and formal aspects of the learning process. Class lectures will thus offer a more life-like “thinking through” the issues. This places responsibility on the student to read the assigned texts since the purpose of the lectures is not to be a substitute for having to read the texts; for the lectures are not mere abstracts of the information contained in the texts.

Class attendance is required. Learning is more than acquiring factual information contained in texts, though that arduous task is absolutely essential. Learning is more than rote memory. Learning involves “thinking out-loud” and engaging in conversation. Attending class provides a dialogical context for listening and participating in the meaning of ideas; writing essays provides the opportunity for formulating one’s self-understanding of the issues.

### *CLASS SCHEDULE*

#### **I. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD**

(Feb. 17, March 3)

##### **The Nature and Method of Systematic Theology**

Read: Lawson, 1-10, 33-41, 183-203.

Hordern, 130-149, 170-190.

Oden, 1:321-404.

Wood, “Defining the Modern Concept of Self-Revelation.”

##### **The Being of God (natural vs. revealed theology, science vs. faith)**

Read: Lawson, 10-32.

##### **The Trans-Sexuality of God**

Read: Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Why God is Not Mother,” *Christianity Today* (16 August 1993), pp. 16-23. (reserve shelf).

Andrew J. Dell’Olio, “Why Not God the Mother?,” *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1998), 15:193-209. (reserve shelf).

##### **Speaking of God -- the Tacit and Explicit Dimensions of Religious Language**

Read: Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 2-16; 69-82.

Wood, "History and Hermeneutics" (essay available on the reserve shelf)

**A Contemporary Restatement of God's Transcendence as the Power of the Future**

Read: Wood, "Above, Within, or Ahead."

*Recommended Reading* (on the reserve shelf):

Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, pp. 3-21; 25-158

W. Pannenberg, "Feminine Language about God?" *The Asbury Theological Journal*, (Fall 1993) 48:27-29.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 1-47

Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 3-68

**II. THE DOCTRINE OF JESUS CHRIST**

(March 3, April 7)

**The Virgin Birth of Jesus**

Read: Lawson, 55-63.

**The Incarnation**

Read: Lawson, 49-55.

**The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith**

Read: Lawson, 64-75.

Hordern, 191-209

**The Death-Resurrection of Jesus**

Read: Lawson, pp. 96-110.

Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth."

*Recommended Reading:*

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, pp. 172-202

Bartsch, ed. *Kerygma and Myth*

Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*

Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation as History*

J. G. Maachen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*

John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology*

John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*

J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*

Pannenberg, *Jesus--God and Man*

Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, II

**III. THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

(April 7, 28)

**The Person of the Holy Spirit and the Doctrine of the Trinity**

Read: Lawson, pp. 111-125.

Wood, From Barth's Trinitarian Christology to Moltmann's Trinitarian Pneumatology" (reserve shelf)

**Easter and Pentecost--A Theology of Salvation History**

Read: Wood, Easter and Pentecost--A Theology of History" (reserve shelf)

**The Fruit and Gifts of the Holy Spirit**

Read: Wood, "The Spirit of Miracles and Gifts" (reserve shelf)

**The People of God**

Read: Lawson, pp. 126-154

**The Sacraments**

Read: Lawson, pp. 155-182

*Recommended Reading:*

Wood, *Pentecostal Grace*

Wood, *Truly Ourselves, Truly the Spirit's*

Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*

Donald Miller, *the Nature and Mission of the Church*

Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*

Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, ed. George A.

Malone (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).